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SUBJECT: CHURCH LEADERS SHARE SOUTHERN VIEW ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WITH
DAS MARCIEL

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¶1. (C) Summary: During DAS Marciel's meetings with Cardinal Pham Minh Man and Pastor Le Quoc Huy of the Grace Baptist Church on February 7 and 8, respectively, both religious leaders affirmed Vietnam has made significant progress on ensuring the majority of Vietnam's Christians can practice their faith more freely. Both leaders, however, agreed that more needed to be done to promote tolerance and allow religious groups to expand their role in social work and education in Vietnam. End summary.

Cardinal Man: Climate for Catholics

¶2. (C) Cardinal Man told DAS Marciel during their February 7 meeting that religious issues in Vietnam were like the weather, "mostly hot, rarely cold and sometimes cooler." Alluding to the recent clashes between Catholics and police in Dong Chiem, the Cardinal said things were finally "starting to cool down," but the Church remains deeply concerned about ongoing property issues. On GVN-Vatican relations, Man was more positive than in previous meetings, noting that the increasing number of high-level visits was a sign the GVN wanted closer ties. While Man once asserted that Vietnam would not move to establish relations with the Vatican before China, this time he said the pace of normalization would depend on the Communist Party's views here.

¶3. (C) Cardinal Man said the Church was beginning to rebuild its social work institutions, noting two hundred of the four hundred organizations they had prior to 1975 have now been re-established. During President Triet's recent pre-Tet call on the Cardinal, Man asked for more autonomy in managing the Church's charitable programs, noting that religious workers wanted to be 'administrators, not just employees.' On the positive side, the Cardinal said the Church would continue its assistance to people living with HIV/AIDS and has begun to expand its support to the disabled. The Cardinal also said the Church would like to get involved in education again, and believes the Church could provide a more ethical education for Vietnam's growing number of young Catholic professionals.

¶4. (C) Cardinal Man concluded the meeting by saying while Vietnamese people enjoyed more religious freedom now than in previous years, the government still could not guarantee the right to practice one's faith freely. DAS Marciel assured the Cardinal the USG would continue to encourage the GVN to improve its dialogue with religious groups and promote the continued

expansion of religious freedom in Vietnam.

Southern Baptists Doing Alright

15. (C) Pastor Le Quoc Huy, General Secretary of the Grace Baptist Church, painted a largely positive picture during his February 8 meeting with DAS Marciel. As part of their 50th anniversary celebrations, Grace Baptist recently hosted a high-level delegation from the U.S. Southern Baptist Convention, including a visit by former President of the U.S. Southern Baptist Convention Dr. Bobby Welch. Dr. Welch and other church representatives had just returned from Hanoi, where they held productive meetings with senior-level GVN officials, including the acting Chairman of the National Committee for Religious Affairs, the head of the Vietnam Fatherland Front and the Vice Chairman of the Communist Party's Mass Mobilization Committee.

16. (C) Like most Protestant groups in Vietnam, Huy said times were tough for Grace Baptist Church members after the war. Foreign missionaries fled, and the church went underground. Pastors were routinely called in by security forces. In the 1990's, congregations began to increase and stabilize, but restrictions remained. While churches in urban areas had fewer problems, provincial followers faced forced renunciations and police intimidation. Huy said the GVN exhibited more "flexibility" after Vietnam liberalized its laws on religion in 2006, which finally culminated in the Grace Baptist church achieving national recognition in 2008.

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17. (C) Grace Baptist's new status meant they could open an official bible school, engage in more international events and exchanges, and train new clergy. It has become easier for congregations to register and to hold large events. The church also has a number of properties that were confiscated after 1975, and hoped recognition would aid in negotiations with Hanoi, though Huy felt it was unlikely the majority of properties would be returned. Huy's optimism was tempered -- he noted that most of the unrecognized Protestant house churches still faced problems, including delays in registration and harassment in some provincial, rural areas.

CPC Won't Help

18. (C) DAS Marciel noted that negative incidents like the expulsion of Buddhist monks at Bat Nha pagoda and violence against Catholics at Dong Chiem are leading some NGOs and members of Congress to advocate more strongly in favor of putting Vietnam back on the CPC list. Pastor Huy said the GVN was a "mixed picture" -- some officials are helpful and supportive, while some don't want to see things change. Huy believes the GVN is "changing as fast as it can," and that putting Vietnam back on the CPC list would not result in significant or positive changes in GVN actions. DAS Marciel expressed his appreciation for Pastor Huy's frank and illuminating commentary, and hoped that Grace Baptist and other Protestant groups would continue to play a positive role in fostering better relations with the GVN. DAS Marciel assured Huy that he and other USG officials would continue to advocate for improved conditions for all religious groups in Vietnam.

19. (U) DAS Marciel did not have an opportunity to clear this cable. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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